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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000037

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, IO, AND DRL
PACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: THOUGHTS ON BURMA'S CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM FROM A
PROMINENT EXILE

REF: MARCH 4 BURMA UPDATE

CHIANG MAI 00000037 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary

11. (C) Burma's constitutional referendum presents a choice between perpetuating military rule and finding a way forward, asserted Aung Zaw, editor of the widely-circulated Irrawaddy news magazine. Several groups are unlikely to oppose the Constitution, he opined, due to the fact that if approved, they believe it would usher in an alternative to the current, unsustainable political situation. Though international monitoring of the actual vote is important, he argued that of even greater importance is preventing the regime from using underhanded tactics to secure votes in favor of the draft. Given Irrawaddy's large readership, Aung Zaw's views are likely to influence those of others, both inside and outside Burma.
End Summary.

A Win-Win for the Military

12. (C) In a March 5 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, Aung Zaw said that the upcoming constitutional referendum is a win-win for the military. He asserted that rejection of the document would lead to an indefinite perpetuation of the military regime's grip on power. Its approval, he stated, would also enshrine a significant role for the military in governing the country. Pol/Econ Chief disagreed, noting that if voters approve the draft, and if the vote is seen to be free and fair, the international community will lose the ability to criticize the referendum for being undemocratic. On the other hand, if the

Burmese people reject the document, the international community will be able to legitimately tell the regime that Burma's population is looking for an alternative to the regime's sham roadmap.

Whose Thumbs are Up, and Whose are Down

¶3. (C) Aung Zaw opined that several groups will likely vote in favor of the Constitution. He cited mainly the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), -- the regime's mass member mobilization organization -- with approximately 24 million members), the National Unity Party (the USDA's political party), and what he called the "third force," composed of some ceasefire groups, businessmen, and others, who believe that anything -- even a Constitution that gives the military 25 percent of the seats in Parliament -- is better than perpetuation of the status quo. (Note: Although the USDA has 24 million members, half are under the age of 18 and therefore prohibited from voting. Youth under the age of 18 are also forced to join the USDA, regardless of their political views.)

¶4. (C) Aung Zaw also asserted that some Scandinavian and EU diplomats are supporting approval of the referendum, which they see as a positive step. (Comment: This sentiment is not inconsistent with information reported in a USEU e-mail to the Department (Ref), and is consistent with information obtained by Embassy Rangoon.) Given the probable support for the referendum from these groups, Aung Zaw opined that opponents of the referendum have to make strong arguments against it rather than relying solely on the principled position that it is undemocratic.

¶5. (C) If the vote is truly free and fair, Aung Zaw said that the Burmese people would undoubtedly reject the Constitution.

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Even the majority of USDA members, he stated, would likely reject the document if they were allowed to. He said he is certain the USDA will provide its members incentives to support the draft, and disincentives to reject it. (Comment: Though he did not speculate on what these would be, the USDA will likely bus voters to polling stations and pay them to vote yes, and it may threaten the families of voters known to be sympathetic to the democratic opposition in an attempt to coerce them to vote in favor of the Constitution.)

¶6. (C) While he agreed that international monitoring of the vote is desirable, he expressed pessimism that the regime would approve of such an effort. He also argued that even more relevant than monitoring the vote, is taking whatever steps we can to prevent the regime from using underhanded tactics to secure votes in advance of voting day in May. He emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability of the process, and that it has to be inclusive. A free media, he opined, has a significant role to play in ensuring the process' integrity.

What About ASSK?

¶7. (C) Regarding Aung San Suu Kyi, Aung Zaw asserted that she is not bent on running in the 2010 election. If you look at her statements, he said, she is ready to compromise. She could accept being barred from the election, as long as her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), can participate, he opined. If the NLD wins, she would not need to officially be in the government, he argued, but could still play a key role by guiding the NLD's policy-making process.

Comment

18. (C) Aung Zaw's views, though more tempered and analytical than many, and less focused on the fact that the entire constitutional process has been undemocratic, are likely to influence the views of others, both inside and outside Burma. The Irrawaddy is widely-circulated, both through its print and on-line editions, and the magazine provides him with a pulpit for communicating his ideas on the road ahead. Whether ASSK is willing to accept being barred from the 2010 election is a decision she will have to make herself, and we are reluctant to speculate on her views on this scenario.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Rangoon.
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